

VII.

THE OLDEST RECORD OF THE RAMAYANA IN
A CHINESE BUDDHIST WRITING.

By K. WATANABE.

IN the Mahāvibhāṣā,¹ the well-known commentary on the Jñānaprasthāna² of Kātyāyanīputra, there is a short passage which is of importance in the history of Sanskrit epic literature. The great commentary mentions, as an example of the contrast between Buddhist and non-Buddhist books, the size and contents of the Rāmāyaṇa.

The following is a literal English translation from the Chinese version by Yuan Chwāng: "As a book called the Rāmāyaṇa, there are 12,000 ślokas. They explain only two topics, namely: (1) Rāvaṇa carries Sītā off by violence, and (2) Rāma recovers Sītā and returns. The Buddhist scriptures are not so simple. Their forms of composition and meanings are respectively immeasurable and infinite."³

The passage in the older version of Buddhavarman and Tao Tai⁴ exactly corresponds to this, except only that its style is neither so skilful nor so clear as that of Yuan Chwāng.

¹ Nanjio's Cat. of Chinese Tripitaka, Nos. 1263, 1264; Takakusu, "On the Abhidharma Literature of the Sarvāsthivādins" (Journal of the Pali Text Soc. 1905, p. 123 f.).

² Nanjio, 1273, 1275; Takakusu, p. 82 f.

³ Vol. xlv. 如 邏 摩 衍 拏 (Ra-ma-yen-na) 書, 有一 萬 二 千 頌. 唯 明 二 事: 一 明 邏 伐 拏 (Ra-bat-na) 劫 私 多 (Si-ta) 去, 二 明 邏 摩 (Ra-ma) 將 私 多 還. 佛 經 不 爾. 若 文 若 義, 無 量 無 邊.

⁴ Vol. xxvi. The Sanskrit proper names are transcribed as follows:— 羅 摩 衍 Rāmāyaṇa, 思 陀 Sītā, 羅 摩 Rāma. Rāvaṇa is here wrongly confused with 羅 摩 衍 by later editions of the text.

Here follows necessarily a difficult question: When was this valuable commentary composed? The tradition mentioned by Yuan Chwāng,¹ that the work was compiled by 500 Arhats during the reign of King Kaṇiṣka, seems highly doubtful. The late T. Watters has already pointed out its inconsistency with the fact that the book itself refers to an event in Kaṇiṣka's reign as having happened *formerly*.²

We require, therefore, to compare what is said about this tradition in other Buddhist writings. In the "Life of Vasubandhu,"³ translated by Paramārtha, we read that a commentary on the Jñānaprasthāna was composed 500 years after the Buddha's death by 500 Bodhisattvas and Arhats, the author of the commented text acting as their chief, under the protection of a Kāśmīrian king, its literary form being finished by the famous Aśvaghōṣa. The name of the king here is not mentioned; but it is not difficult to suppose that he means Kaṇiṣka, because Aśvaghōṣa is described in some writings⁴ as a spiritual adviser of that great Scythian ruler.

The construction of the whole story in this text is substantially the same as the tradition held by the author of the Si-yu-ki. Only the text is distinguished by considerable Mahāyānist colouring. In it Aśvaghōṣa, a predominant Mahāyānist sage, appears as an important actor, having his dramatic relation to Kātyāyanīputra. It adds 500 Bodhisattvas to the 500 Arhats of Yuan Chwāng's story. So the story in the text is nothing else than a modification of the other legend. Moreover, if the authorized commentary was written by Kātyāyanīputra

¹ Nanjio, 1503, vol. iii; Beal, "Si-yu-ki," i, pp. 151 f.; Watters, "On Yuan Chwang," i, pp. 270-7; Kern, "Manual of Indian Buddhism" (Bühler's Encyclopædia, iii, p. 8), p. 121. Having finished his translation, Yuan Chwāng composed two stanzas, mentioning the story, and added them at the end of the book (vol. cc).

² Watters, i, pp. 272-7. The passage of the Mahāvibhāṣā is in fasciculus cxiv of Yuan Chwāng's version. In the older version this part was lost.

³ Nanjio, 1463; Takakusu's Eng. translation (Toung-pao, 1904), p. 10 f.; Wassilief's "Der Buddhismus," etc., p. 239 f.; Watters, loc. cit., i, p. 278.

⁴ Nanjio, 1340, vol. v; 1329, vol. vii, etc.

himself, it is simply impossible to imagine another compilation of the same kind.

In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra*,¹ ascribed to Nāgārjuna and translated by Kumārajīva, we read the following clear description of our great commentary:—

“One hundred years after the death of the Buddha, King Aśoka had summoned a ‘Great Assembly held every five years’ (*Pañca-varṣa-parṣad*)². As many of the teachers there assembled held various opinions in theological discussions, there arose different names of sects. After this event, the age came down to the time of a Brahman monk of the Kātyāyana family, who had profound wisdom and acute senses. Having studied the whole Tripiṭaka, as well as other Buddhist and Brahmin literatures, and wishing to explain the words of the Buddha, he composed the eight skandhas of the *Jñānaprasthāna*, the first section of which is the ‘*Lokottara-dharma*.’³ Afterwards his disciples compiled the *Vibhāṣā*,⁴ as the people could not understand throughout the meaning of the eight skandhas.”

This description, in its character, is less legendary than the other two texts, but throws no light on the date of the compilation, showing only that the commentary was composed some little while after the time of Kātyāyanīputra, whose own date is most uncertain.

But if we accept the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* as a genuine work of Nāgārjuna, who lived, according to Professor Kern,⁵ about the middle of the second century, the *Vibhāṣā* it describes might be supposed to have been written at least some half a century before. This would bring us to about

¹ Nanjio, 1169, vol. ii.

² 般遮于瑟大會.

³ 發智經八犍度, 初品是世第一法. Compare the passage with the contents of the *Jñānaprasthāna* as given by Takakusu, p. 68. 犍度 according to Nanjio “*Khaṇḍa*,” to Takakusu “*Grantha*.” I translate this word after Yuan Chwāng.

⁴ 毗婆沙.

⁵ “Manual of Indian Buddhism,” p. 123.

the time of King Kaniska, and we may be permitted to think that the narrative in the Si-yu-ki is not absolutely fictitious. But as many things remain to be further investigated, I will here refrain from any positive conclusion.

Laying aside this difficult question, we have reason to believe that the Mahāvibhāṣā must have existed at least half a century before the time of its older translation.

Kumārajīva began his work of translation in 402 A.D.¹ The date of the translated Śāstra, therefore, cannot be later than 400 A.D., and the Vibhāṣā therein described belongs naturally to an older time. Though we assume the latest possible date, still we cannot doubt its existence at the end of the first half of the fourth century; and it may be dated much before that. In any case, the description in the Mahāvibhāṣā is—along with the well-known Rāmāyaṇa portion of the Mahābhārata²—the oldest literary record of the Rāmāyaṇa yet known, and its clear mention of the size of the epic is especially valuable.

Beside this valuable information, there is nothing to be found concerning the matter of the Rāmāyaṇa or its great brother epic, the Mahābhārata, in the whole 200 volumes of the great commentary. But the passage relating to the Sītāyajña³ is worthy to be mentioned here, because Professor Jacobi,⁴ in his well-grounded Rāmāyaṇa theory, has pointed out the relation of the epic to this old ceremony. The passage in the older version runs thus:—

“If a farmer sowed the seeds and in the autumn gained a good harvest, he would say: ‘This is a grateful boon from the goddesses Śrī, Sītā, and Śamā.’”⁵

¹ Nanjio, 1485, vol. v. See Nanjio, p. 406.

² Mbh. iii, 273-291.

³ Hillebrandt's “Ritual-Literatur” (Bühler's Encyc. iii, 2), p. 87. S.B.E. xxix, p. 332; xxx, p. 113.

⁴ Jacobi's “Rāmāyaṇa,” p. 130 f.

⁵ Vol. iv. The names of the goddesses are thus transcribed: 尸利夜, Si-ri-ya; 思陀夜, Si-da-ya; 舍摩夜, Sha-ma-ya. *ya* seems here to represent fem. genitive (ablative) °yāḥ or instrumental °yā. The corresponding passage in the new version, vol. ix, is slightly different.

As this ceremony was almost forgotten in later Sanskrit texts, the passage gives evidence of the ancient date of the Mahāvibhāṣā.

It may not be quite useless to add here another description of the epic in the "Life of Vasubandhu." I shall borrow the passage from the excellent English translation by Professor Takakusu:—¹

"Now he would discuss in the assembly the principles of the Vibhāṣā, then he would inquire about the story of the Rāmāyaṇa."

This shows that the Rāmāyaṇa, even in the time of Vasubandhu, who, as is most likely, flourished about 420–500 A.D.,² was a popular book and widely known, even among the Buddhists.³

¹ Life of Vasubandhu, p. 14; Wassiljew, p. 240.

² Takakusu, "The Date of Vasubandhu": J.R.A.S. 1905. Watanabe, "On the Life of Dignāga" (Japanese): Oriental Philosophy, 1904, No. 5.

³ It is perhaps referred to by Buddhaghosa in the Sumangala Vilāsini, vol. i, p. 84.